

REVIEW: *TRIBAL STORIES REMEMBERED*

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Xiuyan 秀雁. 2009. *Yuanqu de buzhu wuyu* 远去的部族物语 [*Tribal Stories Remembered*]. Lanzhou 兰州: Gansu minzu chubanshe 甘肃民族出版社 [Gansu Nationalities Press]. 186 pp. ISBN 978-7-5421-1587-4 (paperback 48RMB).

The author Xiuyan, also known as Aqiong (A Qiong, A mchong, b. 1965), is from Zhiduo ('Bri stod) County, Yushu (Yul shul) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai (Mtsho sngon) Province. She is a retired teacher who once taught at the Yushu Campus of the College of Tibetan Literature, Qinghai Nationalities University. Aqiong has also received training from the Lu Xun Literature Institute. Her published works include her first novel - *Tribal Stories Remembered* (2007); *Yushu da dizhen* 'The Yushu Earthquake' documenting the aftermath of the 2010 Yul shul earthquake; a collection of stories entitled *Tiankong yijiu zhanlan* 'The Sky is Still Blue' (2015); and a novel, *Dukou hun* 'The Spirit of the Ferry Business' (2016). In addition to these works, Aqiong has also written poetry and articles.<sup>2</sup>

Aqiong's literary works are based on traditional Kham (Khams) society and culture, with a focus on her native Yushu. Through her writings, she documents and reflects on local historical realities. The overriding theme of her work is local people's life stories in critical times, revealing the interactions and conflicts among the local people and between locals and outsiders, and portraying a vibrant society of rapid change (Ge 2017).

*Tribal Stories Remembered* is set in the Kham Tibetan area from 1900 to the late 1940s, a time of major sociopolitical changes in China, and reflects the historical realities of that period. The

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<sup>2</sup> Aqiong provided the information in this paragraph.

protagonist, introduced as "the Chinese monk" (hereafter TCM), is based on a real character who was born to a wealthy Chinese family that declined due to his grandfather's addiction to opium. He received higher education at Beijing University. Influenced by his uncle, who strongly believed in Tibetan Buddhism, he became a monk. At the age of twenty-six, he studied Buddhism with Lama Babang saiduo at Dege (Sde dge) Monastery. TCM's obvious intelligence led Lama Babang saiduo to introduce him to Lama Angga, who was well-known in Kham (and also a real historical figure). Later forced to become a layman, TCM married a local Tibetan woman and lived the remainder of his life in the Angwang Tribe in Kham.<sup>1</sup>

The novel follows TCM's life in a Tibetan tribe, narrated by his son in the first person. Different parts and stages of TCM's life - as a monk at Tibetan monasteries, as a married man, a father, and a well-educated man enthusiastic about scholarly work and education - are described in the circumstances of the Tibetan setting in which he lived. The story shows how his life trajectory was greatly impacted by the sociopolitical conditions of the local and larger Kham Tibetan area. For instance, TCM was forced to become a layman because Chieftain Guoma disliked him. Chieftain Guoma was greedy and invaded the land of the Tongqie Tribe, which resulted in disputes and conflicts between the two tribes. TCM used the issue as an example of bad conduct when he gave his teachings. In revenge, Chieftain Guoma used his relationship with the regional military ruler, Ma Bufang<sup>2</sup> (referred to as "Ma"), to force TCM to break his religious vows and to become a layman, which was regarded as dishonorable. TCM and his wife and son suffered, as did everyone else in the Angwang Tribe during this period.

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<sup>1</sup> The author told me that TCM and Lama Angga are real characters, while the others are fictional.

<sup>2</sup> Qinghai Province of the Republic of China was formed in 1928. In the 1930s, the Muslim warlord, Ma Bufang (1903-1975), gained control of the northeastern part of Amdo, which was officially annexed to Qinghai Province. In 1949, the Nationalists appointed Ma the military governor of northwest China. However, in August of 1949, the advancing PLA defeated his troops and the Communists gained control over the area (Powers and Templeman 2012:51-52).

Situated in the context of twenty-five Tibetan tribes in Xikang,<sup>1</sup> the first half of the novel details the contacts and conflicts among five of the local tribes - Angwang, Naihe, Tongqie, Angcuo, and Guoma. The details of the interactions among these tribes illuminate many important features of traditional Tibetan lifestyle, some of which no longer exist. Religious belief, chieftainship, and traditional law and marriage patterns were some of the vital factors that influenced the political and social relations within and among the traditional tribes.

The crucial role of religion in the lives of Tibetan is reflected in the novel in various ways. For instance, Angwang was the chieftain of the Angwang Tribe. He was also a lama at a local monastery, as was his brother. Angwang and his family's influence meant he had a strong political voice and was effective in managing and solving local affairs, which also contributed to his business success. TCM was also accepted and respected by local Tibetans because of his interest in and knowledge of Buddhism.

Chieftainship was an important aspect of traditional Tibetan tribal society. Different ranks of chieftainship constituted the local power structure. The five tribes described in the novel belonged to the chieftainship of One Hundred Households (Ch. *baihu*), with each tribe being ruled by one *baihu*. Chieftains of the same rank were independent of each other in terms of power relations. However, higher ranking chieftans, e.g., *qianhu* 'Chieftain of One Thousand Households' had authority over lower ranking chieftains. The chieftains were the main players in the local sociopolitical organization, and the chieftainship title was inherited within a family. Tribesmen obeyed their chieftain and regarded themselves as "his people." Thus, legitimate inheritance of the chieftainship and locals' acknowledgement were essential in maintaining rigid, hierarchical sociopolitical tribal structures.

The novel also portrays how traditional law played a key role in organizing social affairs and maintaining social harmony. Concepts of "right" and "wrong" were largely shaped by people's understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> A province established in 1939 that included much of the Kham Tibetan area. Xikang Province was divided between Sichuan Province and the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1955.

traditional law. For example, when a tribal member betrayed his chieftain and sought protection from another, the deed was criticized by people from both tribes with the issue subject to mediation. Major conflicts such as inter-tribal conflicts were solved in the same way.

Marriage patterns also figure prominently, illustrating how similar social status was important in creating marriage connections. The chieftains' descendants sought spouses of similar social status to further elevate and strengthen their social position and resist invasion from other tribes. Meanwhile, ordinary people married among themselves. This marriage pattern reflects a clear division between the powerful and the powerless. Challenges to this marriage pattern, as a result of free love for instance, were unacceptable.

The second half of the novel focuses on political interactions between the local Tibetan tribes and Ma's force. In the 1930s, Ma sought to cooperate with local chieftains as a way to increase his power among local Tibetan tribes. The chieftains evaluated and judged the situation based on their own interests and benefits and acted accordingly. Some chose to be neutral while others rejected Ma's proposals. Guoma, the chieftain of the Guoma Tribe, allied with Ma to protect himself from other chieftains who disliked him.

Regardless of the stand a chieftain took, in the end Ma's army waged wars against those who refused or could not pay his heavy taxes. Ma's soldiers killed many local Tibetans, stole their livestock, and forced the tribes to abandon their homes and land to seek shelter elsewhere. Ma was active and powerful in Tibetan areas until the Chinese Communist Party assumed control in the late 1940s. The story ends at this point, heralding a new historical moment.

Though valuable in its portrayal of the structure and life of Kham prior to the 1950s, it is limited in terms of providing a broad historical and political context of China and the world. For example, a conflict is mentioned between Tibetans and the British, but the historical background information that is necessary for a better understating of the event is lacking. Furthermore, a brief overview of the political structure of China in the early twentieth century would help clarify contemporary events in Tibetan tribes. Nevertheless, the novel is a fascinating read. Those interested in learning about traditional life in tribal societies - particularly Tibetans - would find

the novel of interest. As the author told me in an online chat, "The novel reflects on the nature of history, but not the truth of history!"

## REFERENCES

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## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'bri stod འབྲི་སྟོད།

Ang ga 昂噶

a mchong ཨ་མཚོང་།

a mdo ཨ་མདོ།

Anduo 安多

Angcuo 昂措

Angwang 昂旺

Aqiong 阿琼

Babang saiduo 巴帮赛多

Beijing 北京

baihu 百户

Dege Monastery 德格印经院

Du kou hun 渡口魂

Gansu 甘肃

Guoma 郭麻

Khams 康巴

Lanzhou 兰州

Linxia 临夏

Lu Xun 鲁迅

Ma Bufang 马步芳

mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོང་།

Naihe 乃禾

qianhu 千户

Qinghai 青海

Tian kong yi jiu zhan lan 天空依旧湛蓝

Tongqie 同切

Xikang 西康

yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ།

Yushu 玉树

Yushu da di zhen 玉树大地震

Zhiduo 治多